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OFFICE OF
NATIONAL ESTIMATES

MEMORANDUM

The Crisis in Croatia

MORI/CDF

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5 January 1972

Copy No. 105

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

5 January 1972

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: The Crisis in Croatia*

Tito's recent actions in Croatia have, by his own account, saved Yugoslavia from civil war and possible foreign (Soviet) intervention. Tito probably exaggerates, but there is little question that he was greatly alarmed by the rising tide of Croatian nationalism, by the inability or unwillingness of the Croatian Communist Party to do anything about it, and, indeed, by the prospect of Belgrade's losing control over the Federation's second largest republic. In any case, Tito has moved to shake up the Croatian leadership, to repress the militant students and other extremists, and in general to reassert federal authority in Zagreb. He also has spoken out strongly against the kind of "rotten liberalism" which he claims led to the Croatian crisis and has promised measures which will prevent a recurrence -- in Croatia or anywhere else in Yugoslavia where national passions may run high.

This memorandum examines the origins of the crisis, evaluates Tito's handling of it, and assesses implications for the future and for the country as a whole.

* *This Memorandum was prepared by the Office of National Estimates and discussed with the Office of Current Intelligence.*

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Causes

1. The proximate cause of the recent political crisis in Croatia was the strike of Zagreb University students which began in late November. The students claimed that they had walked out in support of the campaign by the leaders of the Croatian Republic to obtain a larger share of Yugoslavia's foreign currency earnings. For Belgrade, though, the real issue was a resurgence of Croatian nationalism which the strike symbolized and which threatened to destroy the Titoist system and even Yugoslavia itself.

2. A good share of the responsibility for the crisis falls on the strong liberal wing of the Croatian Communist Party. This wing has for some years sought to exploit nationalistic sentiment in order to consolidate its local power and to win concessions from the central authorities in Belgrade. Croatia's principal student organizations and publications were taken over by non-Communist nationalistic elements last winter and spring. The Croatian Party acquiesced in this -- in fact, key liberal members of the Croatian Central Committee gave these takeovers their tacit approval. And while most of the Croatian Party's prominent liberal leaders subsequently recognized that it was dangerous to allow the militant

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nationalists to expand their influence in this way, their basic "state's rights" orientation and strategy remained unchanged.

3. Belgrade's anxiety about the course of developments in Croatia had turned into serious alarm by mid-autumn. The Croatian Party had virtually ceased to coordinate its activities with the federal Party organs. Croatian extremists, including some Communists, had begun publicly to demand that Croatia have its own army, customs service, and foreign office. Reports reached Belgrade of serious divisions within the Croatian Party and of behind-the-scenes maneuvers which blocked the implementation of corrective measures. Both the central Party and responsible figures in the Croatian Party seemed to be losing control, and the implications for Croatia and for the country as a whole were ominous.

4. In late November, Tito cut short his visit to Romania and summoned all of Croatia's top leaders to his hunting lodge in Karadjordjevo for a "critical discussion" of their problems and policies. The meeting lasted the whole day and most of the night of 30 November. But the results of this marathon exercise were, by Tito's own account, unsatisfactory. Tito concluded that two thirds of those assembled agreed with his recommendations for vigorous action. But he also found that

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an important "inner leadership" -- the group associated with Croatian Party President Savka Dabcevic-Kucar and a Croatian representative on the Yugoslav Party Executive Bureau, Mika Tripalo -- was still defiant. As had often happened in the past, it appeared likely that measures agreed to in principle would be evaded in practice. But this time, Tito's patience was exhausted, and he decided to force the issue by repeating in public what he had been telling the Croats in private.

5. Tito set forth his charges in an address to the national Party Presidium on 1 December. He asserted that the Zagreb authorities had had ample advance warning of the student strike but had done nothing to prevent it. He blamed the strike on "counterrevolutionary forces" flourishing under the permissive policies of the Croatian Communist Party leadership. He reiterated his belief that some of these "chauvinist" and "anti-socialist groups" enjoyed support from abroad.* And he

* Subsequent official statements have reiterated Belgrade's irritation at the ability of Croatian emigre groups to operate in several West European countries with little or no interference from the authorities. Belgrade's principal concern, however, lies in another direction, i.e., toward the East. Indeed, the Yugoslavs have repeatedly charged the USSR with attempting to manipulate and exploit their nationality problems. They have failed to substantiate their charges, but it is clear that the Soviets have been active in establishing contact with potentially useful individuals -- including students -- throughout Yugoslavia. There is some evidence to suggest that they have been in touch with Croatian emigre groups as well.

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accused the Croatian leadership of "rotten liberalism" and "lack of vigilance".

6. Tito did not confine his criticism to the Croats. He stated that the principal danger to Yugoslavia's unity and social order now stemmed from chauvinist forces active in all the republics, and he directed the republican and provincial parties to clean house in preparation for the Party (LCY) Conference early this year.

7. But there was no question as to who would have the most to do. The Presidium's endorsement of Tito's views and recommendations, while cast in moderate language, set the stage for sweeping changes only in Croatia. On 12 December, Dabcevic-Kucar, Tripalo, and two of their closest associates resigned from all political office. Fourteen nationalist student leaders and activists were arrested in Zagreb. And Tito personally suspended the Chief of Staff of the Zagreb Military District, a Croatian Lt. Colonel General, for extreme nationalist views.

8. This sudden turn of events generated shock and confusion in Croatia. A wave of resignations -- some the result of pressure, some apparently intended as gestures of protest -- hit the political bureaucracy as well as those publications and organizations

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specifically charged with chauvinist excesses. And tensions were then heightened by the protests of some 400-500 Zagreb University students (less than 2 percent of the student body) who demonstrated for four consecutive nights against the purges and arrests of nationalist leaders.

9. Tito's tactics in linking his action to the Zagreb University strike had succeeded in focusing local resentment on student extremism. But the deposed political leaders were popular. Their guilt of anything more serious than overpermissiveness had not been clearly established. In any event, there was widespread concern that too vigorous a purge would open the way for a return to power of previously-discredited hard-line Communists, anxious to settle old scores and willing to restore order arbitrarily and through brutal means. The possibility of serious disturbances seemed for a time to be very high.

10. But the population-at-large has in fact remained fairly passive. Student demonstrators, no longer willing to test the police in large-scale confrontations, have disappeared from the streets. The new republican leadership, which has no wish to perpetuate the crisis, has proceeded with caution (though not necessarily in all the ways desired by Belgrade). And the

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tasks of the new leadership have been eased somewhat by the recent decision of the federal government to allow the individual republics to retain a larger share of their own foreign currency earnings -- a move of special significance, both symbolic and real, in Croatia.

11. The new Croatian leaders and Tito have in the meantime raised the spectre of Soviet intervention. There is no evidence that Moscow was, in fact, involved in any substantial way in the Croatian events, but the average Yugoslav is still quite prepared to believe the worst of the Kremlin. The invocation of the threat thus should help the Croatian authorities in their efforts to restore unity (and help Tito in his efforts to convince the skeptics that his harsh moves in Croatia were really necessary).

12. But Tito's principal trump card throughout the crisis was -- as it had been in some tight situations in the past -- the loyalty and unity of the country's top military leadership. With the single exception of the one Croatian general who was found wanting, Tito apparently received the unequivocal support of the military establishment. This was specifically and publicly emphasized by Defense Minister Ljudbicic in mid-December, and Tito himself openly confirmed on 20 December

CONFIDENTIAL

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that he had been prepared to bring in the army if things had threatened to get out of hand. Surely the lesson of these statements -- that the army would be willing and Tito would thus probably be able to ensure federal survival through force if necessary -- were not lost on the forces of separatism.

Complications

13. Still, the new Croatian leadership has started out in a difficult position. It has had to adopt a tough posture with respect to chauvinism, Party discipline, and the maintenance of public order. But it cannot ignore the dominant liberal mood in the Party and among the people. Thus, while the Croatian Central Committee has proclaimed its full agreement with Tito's assessment of nationalistic excesses and pledged vigorous corrective action, it has also reaffirmed a number of old liberal positions which seem out of step with the thrust of Tito's remarks. It has declared that the struggle against nationalism should not be allowed to weaken action against the old dogmatic opponents of Yugoslavia's reformist course. It has also asserted that the policy line of the Croatian Party adopted in January 1970 (which favored liberal positions and greater republican autonomy) is

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not under fire, that there will be no "witch hunt", and that the "democratic and humane norms of Party life" will be strictly observed.

14. It may be that, in permitting the reassertion of these liberal positions, the Croatian leadership has misjudged Tito's intentions. Tito has, in fact, threatened a broad retreat from democratic practices. He has assaulted "liberalism", criticized the courts for overemphasis on legal niceties, and asserted that democratic safeguards (including the "immunity of the university") must never be allowed to impede "revolutionary action" against "counterrevolutionary" elements.

15. But Tito has also made it clear that he wishes the essentials of his decentralized system to survive. Certainly he does not wish to turn his regime over to hard-liners who might seek to reimpose totalitarian rule from Belgrade and who might, in the process, seek support from the USSR. Liberal elements in Croatia, moreover, have consistently been among the strongest supporters of Tito's reforms, and he presumably has no intention of putting them to rout. There thus is some reason to believe that Tito's strong language has been in part designed for shock effect, that he felt it necessary to wake

CONFIDENTIAL

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up the moderates, to force the immediate removal of the more militant leaders, and to neutralize the extreme nationalists.

16. In any event, liberal (though not extremist) forces in Zagreb have by now surely drawn some encouragement from Tito's own repeated assertions that there can be no return to the past. They must also have been encouraged by recent articles in the central Party weekly which have praised the way the Croats are handling their problems and promised them wide support -- not only in their efforts to cope with nationalism but in their struggle against the hard-liners ("the champions of omnipotent bureaucratic centralism and the policy of the iron fist") as well.

17. All in all, though echoes of the events will no doubt reverberate throughout the republic for some time to come, the immediate crisis in Croatia seems to have subsided fairly rapidly. Tito's timing may have been somewhat off -- it has been said in Belgrade that if he had moved sooner he might have been able to avoid such severe measures. But, on the whole, Tito's moves seem to have been effective when and where they were needed most.

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Consequences and Questions for the Long Term

18. Tito was nevertheless very much shaken by the course of events in Croatia. He seems to have been greatly surprised by the vigor of the Croatian nationalists, shocked by the apparent lassitude of the top leaders in Belgrade, and -- beyond the emergency measures he ordered in Croatia -- perplexed about what precisely he and his colleagues should do next. While declaring that the fundamentals of the Yugoslav system will be retained, he has nonetheless announced his determination to find ways to prevent a recurrence. He evidently feels (and rightly so) that the Party, which he had counted on to behave as a unifying national force, was especially remiss -- both in Zagreb (where its leaders either failed to act or actually joined the wrong side) and in Belgrade (where it seemed unable to take decisive action). He may also be aware that his own failure to provide active leadership in recent months was in part responsible for the Party's inertia. In any case, Tito is now prepared to focus on the question of the Party and its role in national life.

19. Tito now admits that the idea of a Party which guides but does not lead -- a Yugoslav premise for twenty years or so -- is not a practical concept. He now holds, in fact, that the

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Party must be able to exercise firm control over Yugoslavia's decentralized society. It thus must become, he says, a compact and well-disciplined organization, completely free of regional nationalism (as was most decidedly not the case in Croatia) and totally committed to federal and socialist ideals. He demands that greater power be vested in the central Party organs, possibly through the imposition of new limits on the prerogatives of the republican and provincial level Parties. He calls for much tighter discipline at the republican level, to be enforced if necessary by the active intervention of the central apparatus. He insists that the central organs themselves must be revamped to make them less cumbersome and less vulnerable to division along nationality lines. And, finally, he asserts that the central Party organs must be able to intervene if unyielding positions threaten to disrupt the operation of the government.

20. How easily such changes can be implemented and how effective they may prove to be in the longer run is open to question. In the confusion and enthusiasm accompanying the introduction and development of Yugoslavia's decentralized system, the Party has over time surrendered much of its power. It will be difficult to restore. Some elements of the Party seem to have lost the habit of command. Many Party officials

CONFIDENTIAL

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seem to have other interests and owe their first loyalties to other institutions or to local constituencies. And many regional Party organizations seem to have been swept up in a rising tide of nationalism and blinded by a growing pre-occupation with the economic self-interests of their individual provinces and republics.

21. There is, moreover, a basic contradiction -- or quandary -- inherent in Tito's new approach. It is one thing to hold the army in reserve as the final guarantor of federal integrity; this need not directly affect the course of decentralization and so-called self-management. It is quite another to demand that a single, centralized, and authoritarian body, the Party, actively participate in and control the entire process. What could be the meaning of a program of decentralization which continues to be run firmly -- and without real statutory restraint -- from the center? A genuine program of political and economic decentralization (of the sort in fact followed to date) inevitably carries with it a parallel decentralization of Party authority as well.

22. Perhaps the Yugoslav Party could serve as a more effective instrument of national unity -- without reverting to

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traditional totalitarian norms -- if it were better organized and less apathetic than it now seems to be. But, while still meaningful to Tito and some of the old guard, old-fashioned Communist rhetoric -- appeals to revolutionary consciousness and to concepts of a classless society -- sounds out of place in contemporary Yugoslavia. And threats of "Party discipline" no longer strike terror in the hearts of the (almost) faithful. Ideological enthusiasm and unquestioning obedience are thus likely to remain the exception rather than the rule in the LCY. Moreover, even if the Party were somehow to be transformed, the question of its role would remain unclear (and probably controversial) at least so long as the guidelines for the Titoist system remained so obscure -- i.e., so long as there were no explicit limits on the degree of political decentralization, the level of economic self-management, and the extent of individual democratic rights. Such limits do not now exist and are unlikely to be formulated with any precision in the foreseeable future, short of a complete change of direction.

23. Even so, Tito's call for a major reform of the Party and his demand that the Party exercise more effective nation-wide power could in time have some beneficial results. Cumbersome machinery can be improved, individual malcontents and incompetents

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can be fired, and more effective levers of power can be provided the central organs. But Tito has so far failed to spell out some of the specifics of reform and this has already led to squabbling within top Party councils. Some leaders -- who presumably represent Tito's views -- wish to give a reconstituted Executive Bureau considerable authority to implement Party policy, at least indirectly at the expense of republican Party organs. Other leaders, fearful of an accretion of power in Belgrade, have resisted this openly and argue against any major enhancement of the Bureau's role. The quarrel should be settled before the convocation of the LCY Conference later this month, but so far remains an unresolved and potentially divisive issue. Similar confusion has often existed in the past -- again as the consequence of Tito's unwillingness or inability to make his wishes entirely clear -- but only rarely when there seemed to be, as there is now, such an urgent need for decisive action.

24. All this, of course, leads to the neat question: can a country such as Yugoslavia -- poor, backward, and Balkan -- long exist as a pluralistic society within a single state? It may be that the regime in Belgrade will someday have to make the hard choice -- whether to try to reassert itself as a strong and ruthless central authority or simply let the individual

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republics go their own and separate ways. That the system has survived thus far may tell us something about the future. But survival may testify mainly to the talents of one extraordinary man, Tito, and to the unifying power of the popular fear of Soviet intervention. The man of course is mortal, and the fear could someday prove to be transitory or, without Tito, ineffective.

25. And now, after Croatia, there are new wounds to heal, perhaps new occasions for Soviet meddling (as, for example, among Tito's targets of abuse). If the Croatian syndrome should prove to be contagious, there may also be new occasions for nationalist outbursts in other areas. Indeed, deep-seated antagonisms between Serbs and Albanians are now surfacing in Kosovo, both within the Party and at the university, probably in partial and indirect consequence of the brouhaha in Zagreb.

26. Withal, the implications of the crisis are not all gloomy, and we see no need, as yet, to revise our previous estimates that the chances are slightly better than even that Yugoslavia will survive Tito's death as a single state. There is even a possibility that the recent crisis will in the long run prove to have been beneficial. The general population has

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demonstrated resiliency and restraint. The dedication of the military to the idea and the purpose of a unified state has been rather forcefully demonstrated. Tito -- until very recently preoccupied with foreign affairs and anxious to remain aloof from day-to-day direction of domestic affairs -- has once again become directly engaged in the political process. Virtually everyone has had a real scare, and this may have a salutary effect. And, finally, since the majority of Yugoslavs seem to feel that the present system is preferable to the most likely alternatives, they may now try a little harder to make it work.

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Page Denied